

A Different Path: What's the Worst that Could Happen?

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Summary: With a twist in time... Thedas has, over the years, faced many threats. Blights. Slavery. War. Maleficar. Demons. And now a hole in the sky and an elder one. But the sad and terrible truth is that the greatest threat to the world has always been elves with good intentions...

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"You can't keep wandering off." Vathran folded his arms and glared at Quiyala.

"Sulana does."

"Sulana isn't a mage. If these..." Vathran shook his head. "Do you want to be dragged off?"

"If we don't talk to anyone, we'll never learn anything. We came here for information, Vathran, or did you forget that part?"

"We came here to observe the proceedings, not sneak through the templar quarters."

"If you'd do it, I wouldn't have to." She walked away, leaving him staring after her in frustration. He turned to the other elven woman. "You could have helped."

"She had a point." Sulana shrugged. "I picked up more information in twenty minutes of playing cards than you picked up in three days of just walking around with your ears up."

"You also lost half our coin and puked in your boots."

"Should I have puked in yours instead?"

Vathran glared at her before walking away. How was he supposed to protect Quiyala if the woman wouldn't listen to him? His father should have sent the second. Fandin was older than Quiyala, and a lot steadier, even if he was less talented at magic. And where had Quiyala gone now?

He headed in the direction he thought she'd gone. It took him some time to spot her. She was standing on the shoulder of one of the big qunari mercenaries, letting him boost her up to peer into a window. She tapped the man's hand, and he lowered her back to the ground. That girl was taking entirely too many risks. All the People knew that the qunari took elves.

She actually hugged the horned oaf before they went off in different directions. He glanced at her, and then went to follow him. He trailed the qunari man to a small band of mercenaries, and heard the leader call out to him.

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Vathran stared up at the horned woman. She folded her arms and stared down at him. "Excuse me?"

"I said, tell your men to stop hassling elven women." He held his ground. "Given Sister Nightingale's friendship with the Dalish, I do not think you wish me to take the matter to her."

"Little man..." The mercenary leader shook her head. "I've got no idea what you are talking about."

"I am talking about your continued employment. Or were you actually supposed to keep that a secret?" He raised an eyebrow, and saw her eyes narrow.

She drew herself up to her full height. "Hop away, little rabbit. Before you end up in a pot."

"Keep your people away from mine, and there will be no further problems." He stalked away before she could respond. Bad enough Sulana spend half her time drinking with the templars. Quiyala had to go hang out with qunari. It's like he was the only one that remembered Quiyala was a mage. Though considering just how dumb Quiyala's horned friend was, it was possible he hadn't noticed.

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And neither Sulana nor Quiyala were back at the camp. Vathran growled. "Dread Wolf take you both..." He turned, and stalked back towards the temple to find them.

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His hand throbbed as though someone had put a knife through it. As he stared at it, it crackled with green energy that sent pain shooting up his forearm. Vathran gasped.

Two women entered. It took him a moment to realize that they were none other than the fabled Leliana and Cassandra. And they were clearly unhappy. Cassandra narrowed her eyes. "Tell me why we

shouldn't kill you now." The woman walked a circle around him. "The Conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead. Except for you."

"What?" He remembered catching a glimpse of Sulana heading down into the temple's lower levels. He'd followed and then... "What do you mean the Conclave is destroyed?"

"Explain this." Cassandra grabbed the wrist of the glowing hand.

"I have no idea what that is."

"You're lying." For a moment, he thought Cassandra was going to go for his throat.

Leliana pulled her back. "We need him, Cassandra."

"They can't..." Vathran shook his head. "All those people?"

"Do you remember what happened?" Leliana stared down at him. "How all this began?"

"Something was..." He frowned. "Something was chasing me. And then..." He shook his head. "A woman?"

"A woman?"

Had it been Sulana or Quiyala? He couldn't make the memory come into focus. "She reached out to me, but then..." The memory faded.

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Vathran stared up at the swirling green hole in the sky. A Breach into the Void itself. He felt his blood go cold. And then pain shot up his arm again, driving him to his knees.

Cassandra looked down at him. Various expressions warred for control of her face. "Each time the Breach expands, your mark spreads..." She narrowed her eyes. "And it is killing you. It may be the key to stopping this, but there isn't much time."

He swallowed. "Sounds like I'm dead either way." He got to his feet and nodded to her. "There is no real choice here."

"None of us has a choice." She nodded, and led him through the camp.

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He glanced at her after she cut his bonds, and then followed her. Once they were out of earshot of anyone, he glanced at her again. "I did not come to the Conclave alone."

Cassandra raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I'm willing to help, to do all I can." He met her eyes. "But I was charged with the safety of my companions. If they survived the..." He swallowed.

"You are concerned for their safety." Cassandra raised an eyebrow.

"I will help. On that, you have my word. But I want your word that after this is done, they'll be allowed to leave here and return safely to our clan." He nodded.

For a moment, she was silent. And then she returned the nod. "Very well. You have my word."

"Thank you."

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The bridge crumbled beneath their feet. Vathran landed, bruised but nothing broken. "Stay behind me." He heard Cassandra shout, and looked to see the woman closing on a demon.

And a second demon was materializing behind her. "Fenedhis." He saw a bow and a few scattered arrows. As the demon fully formed, he put one of those arrows into it.

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It took more than one arrow to bring the demon down. Cassandra pulled her blade out of the other one and turned back towards him. "I think that's all of them." He nodded to her.

Her eyes went to the bow in his hand, and then her blade was pointed at him. "Drop your weapon, now."

Vathran shook his head. "Who knows how many demons are between us and where ever you are taking me?" He took a deep breath. "I gave you my word. And you gave me yours."

Her eyes narrowed, and then she lowered her weapon. "No. You are right. I cannot protect you, and I cannot expect you to be defenseless. There are too many lives at stake."

Together, they headed up the mountain.

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There were several more encounters with demons before they reached their destination. A few soldiers, accompanied by a dwarf and another elf, were fighting demons. The elf was clearly a mage, one at least as talented as Quiyala. Vathran took aim at a demon closing on the elf, sending an arrow into it and slowing it enough to give the mage breathing room.

As soon as the last demon had fallen, the elven mage grabbed his wrist and pulled him to the rift. "Quickly, before more come through."

Magic jolted through his hand, and then the rift was closing. It vanished quickly, and he pulled his hand away from the mage. "What did you do?"

"I did nothing." He nodded to Vathran. "The credit is yours."

He stared down at his hand, barely listening as the elf explained. The dwarf spoke up, and introduced himself as Varric Tethras. He thought the name sounded vaguely familiar. Someone Sulana had mentioned? "You're with the Chantry?"

The elven mage actually laughed. "Was that a serious question?"

"Technically I'm a prisoner." Varric shrugged. "Just like you." He and Cassandra snarked at each other a bit, leaving Vathran to wonder just what kind of mess he'd found himself in.

"Well, it's good to meet you." Vathran nodded.

"You may reconsider that stance, in time." The mage shrugged

"Aww, I'm sure we'll become great friends in the valley, Chuckles." Varric grinned.

And then the dwarf and Cassandra were arguing again. An argument Cassandra lost. The elf shook his head, and glanced over at Vathran. "My name is Solas, if there are to be introductions." The man was unusually tall for an elf. Vathran had been one of the taller men in his clan, and Solas was a good two inches taller than he was. "I am pleased to see you still live."

The apostate was apparently the expert, and the reason he was still alive. Vathran nodded to him before following Cassandra once more.

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He managed to seal the second rift on his own, though he still wasn't sure exactly what was happening. It worked though, and that was likely the only part that really mattered.

Cassandra led them to where Leliana was arguing with a member of the Chantry. A member of the Chantry who almost immediately started campaigning for Vathran to be executed. Fortunately, Cassandra wasn't inclined to simply obey the order.

His hand sparking again put an end to the argument. And caused Cassandra to turn towards him. "How do you think we should proceed?"

"Me?"

"You have the mark." Solas nodded.

"And you are the one we must keep alive." Cassandra gestured. "Since we cannot agree on our own..."

Circling the prey while it was distracted was usually the safest tactic. "Through the mountains. Speed may save lives."

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They came out of the complex to find some dead soldiers. The rest were still up and fighting. Vathran notched an arrow as they went to their aid, sending it into a demon. The bolstered forces made quick

work of the demons, and he sealed the rift as soon as the last had fallen. The soldiers were certainly appreciative of the rescue, and he blinked when Cassandra actually gave him credit. "It was worth saving you, if we could." He nodded.

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"Gods above..." He stared at the sight of the temple. "When you..." He swallowed. "When you said destroyed, I didn't..." Vathran closed his eyes. Quiyala was unaccounted for, but he'd seen Sulana at the temple. "She couldn't have..."

Cassandra turned to him, and then her eyes widened. She gave him a sympathetic nod. "Your companions?"

"I remember seeing Sulana at the temple. Quiyala may be..." He sighed. "Mythal enaste."

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Leliana met them at the temple's entrance. "You're here. Thank the Maker."

"Leliana, have your men take up positions around the temple." Cassandra turned to Vathran. "This is your chance to end this. Are you ready?"

"I am, I just..." He looked up. "I'm not sure how to reach that, let alone close it."

"No." Solas shook his head. "This rift was the first, and it is the key. Seal it, and we may seal the Breach."

"Then let's find a way down. And be careful." Cassandra led them into the ruins.

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Vathran rubbed his head as the pictures faded. A woman, apparently Divine Justinia, held prisoner by someone. His own image, interrupting whatever was happening. And he couldn't remember any of it. Cassandra turned towards him. "You were there. Who attacked? And the Divine, is she...?" Cassandra waved at where the images had been. "Was this vision true? What are we seeing?"

"I don't remember." He shook his head.

"Echoes of what happened here. The Fade bleeds into this place." Solas turned and explained that before they could do anything else, they must first open it so that it could be sealed properly. And that doing so would draw attention.

"That means demons." Cassandra nodded, and began calling out instructions. She nodded to Vathran.

He took a deep breath, and used the magic to tear at the rift.

The demon that manifested was one of the big ones. Because it just couldn't be easy.

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His ribs burned from where one of the pride demon's blasts of electricity had thrown him into rocks. Nearly half of the soldiers that had come with them were dead by the time they'd finally stripped away enough of the demon's defenses to bring the thing down.

Vathran took a deep breath, and raised his hand to the rift. Energy surged forth, causing the rift to convulse. Then it sealed. He let out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. And then darkness claimed him.

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